

Flat out with Aeroflot

by Steve McCabe

When people discover that you are a pilot, they are likely to ask you some fairly predictable and somewhat unfair questions: “Why do airlines charge so much?” “Why are flights always late?” “Why is the lavatory in a 747 so small?” Or simply declare, “I’m a student pilot.” When I was, indeed, still a student pilot, I would often reply, “I don’t even understand why the ‘plane flies.”

Of course, now that I am a commercial pilot and working on becoming a flight instructor, I understand Bernoulli and Newton, but still cannot comprehend the arcane world of airlines. But there’s one airline more than any other that I will never understand. That airline is Aeroflot—or perhaps I should say was (*Airways*, October 2001).

Many years ago, in a previous life, I lived in Japan. That was in the days before I learned to fly, but knew that I wanted to. And while I enjoyed flying and was fascinated by it, I was also at the mercy of the airline industry’s seemingly random fare ‘structure’. So, one year, when it was time to fly home to England for Christmas, I made my regular trip to STA Travel in Ikebukuro. There I was in turn amused, troubled, and finally convinced by a bargain fare offered direct to Manchester—no messing around with connections at London-Heathrow—on, of all carriers, Aeroflot, once the all-encompassing monolith of Soviet air transport.

I handed over my hard-earned yen and bought tickets to Manchester, via Moscow-Sheremetyevo, and packed my bags for the trip home. The flight from Narita to Moscow began full of potential, with passage provided on a brand-new Airbus A310. A comfortable flight, to be sure, but I was less than impressed by the in-flight service. What passed for entertainment was all in Russian (to be expected, I suppose, because this was a flight between Japan and Russia), and therefore a touch disappointing. Food—for want of another description—was, well, Russian. I don’t particularly want to dredge up many more memories than that, so I shall refrain from discussing it further, if that’s all right with you. But it was the cabin crewmembers who really left a lasting impression.

Moscow is, of course, a dozen or more hours from Tokyo, even with the best intentions and efforts of Airbus Industrie. That is an awfully long time for a 6ft 4in (193cm)-tall man to be squished into a seat designed for a 4ft 6in (137cm) frame. And, as many a long-distance flyer will empathize, a beer or two will go only so far. Usually only as far as cruising altitude.

But Olga, my friendly Russian flight attendant, decided that this was not an appropriate way to pass the flight time. “*Nyet*,” she snapped when I asked for my second beer of the flight, an hour-and-a-half after takeoff. “You are drinking too much.” And that was that.

I mused that it was something of an accomplishment



to be told by a Russian that I was drinking excessively—although two small cans of American beer over a couple of hours could hardly be considered drinking, let alone drinking excessively. Being the man that I am, I decided that I would not take *nyet* for an answer from a stewardess. But Olga had probably been hired as a stewardess in the Khrushchev era as a reward for her success in the Olympic Games shot put event. So I sat down and shut up.

The flight from Moscow to Manchester was altogether more uneventful; but the approach and landing were a different matter. A four-hour hop in a Tupolev (or maybe it was an Ilyushin—something tells me that type certifications were never a major concern for an airline whose passenger airplanes had bomb-sighting blisters mounted beneath the cockpits) was nearing its conclusion, and we were ready to land. Or so I thought.

When I was a boy growing up near Manchester Airport (IATA: MAN, ICAO: EGCC, *Airways*, December 2003), I used to watch the airplanes flying overhead, and soon realized that my part of the city wasn't that close to Ringway, site of MAN, and that the aircraft, even if they passed over me, would be fairly high. So it was with a little concern that I looked out of the window and realized that we were circling over The Crescent and the University of Salford at around 1,600ft (500m). While I didn't have Jeppesen charts for EGCC with me, I was fairly sure that we were—to be somewhat blunt—lost.

I suggested this to my seatmate, who replied that, no, we couldn't be, and that the captain was, surely, a highly skilled professional. I allowed as how this might well be true, and waited for the landing, which was eventually

greeted—as all landings were on Aeroflot flights—by a round of applause from the Russian passengers. We landed, we braked, we left the runway—at a taxiway, I must admit—and we started to taxi. And we taxied. And then we taxied a little more.

Now, Ringway is not a huge airport. No JFK this, Manchester International had, at the time, only one runway and two medium-size terminals. We did, however, manage to taxi round the terminals at least twice before we finally arrived at the gate. “Comrade passengers, you are now free to leave your seats.” I was most relieved to hear this, having spent much of the flight horizontal. Of course, on many airplanes a fully-reclining seat would be the preserve of first class, but Aeroflot—true to its egalitarian roots and tenets—made sure that even those of us proletarian enough to be travelling in economy class would lie back and enjoy the flight.

No, wait—that's a lie. The truth is that the seat was broken and most of the flight was spent with my seatback compressing the middle-aged, non-English-speaking, and increasingly aggravated Russian businessman in the seat behind me. I am sure he applauded louder than most when we landed. Assuming, of course, that he could even move his hands.

We arrived at the gate, I made a break for the door, and was greatly relieved to be standing on home soil again. As I relaxed that afternoon, enjoying a cup of tea with my family and sharing with them the joys of my trip, I was asked if I would ever book a flight with Aeroflot again. Absolutely, I said, I would be happy to fly the hammer and sickle again...but only if the seats were cheap. ✈